

SEVENTH ANNUAL MILFOIL SUMMIT

Keynote presentation
by
Commissioner David P. Littell
Maine Department of Environmental Protection

Thank you, Peter. I'm delighted to be at this year's milfoil summit. For seven years, folks in this room -- biologists, sportsmen, lakeside residents and state officials among others -- have met to discuss many things, including the state of invasive aquatic species in our state and to assess where we stand and what's next in our efforts to protect Maine's lakes from the threat of aggressive non-native species.

Before I begin with an assessment, it is worth mentioning that, in my two and a half years of public service, with three months now spent as DEP Commissioner, it is a pleasure to stand before a room of concerned citizens that support us environmentally and to present good news rather than to plead against budget cuts.

As all of you know, the last three years have been rough financially on all of State government. Governor Baldacci and we inherited a financial mess, a \$1.2 billion structural gap and additional borrowing. Through tough budgetary decisions and management, that structural gap was reduced to \$700 million in the 1st Baldacci budget and now to \$350 million while complying in the voters' mandate to increase education funding – increased education funding by \$300 million per biennium. DEP has less staff today than in 2003, doing more work that protects our environment and those

428 staff deserve all of our gratitude for continually striving for ways to achieve more environmental protection with less state and federal resources.

Today, I have the pleasure in sharing great news. Since DEP's Invasive Aquatic Species Program began in 2001, one or more aquatic plant infestations have been documented every year. These infestations have either been an incipient infestation or a well-established infestation that had not yet been documented in the state.

However, the Department is delighted to report that *no new infestations have been documented for 2005 in Maine*. You are the people from around the state that have committed themselves each year, for six years, to be part of this success story. It is because of you that we have reached this milestone.

Let me provide a little more context. With 6,000 ponds and lakes in Maine, 26 have documented infestations. Of those, 23 ponds have Variable milfoil while 3 contain Maine's only infestations of Hydrilla, Eurasian milfoil and Curly-leaf pondweed. To have 5,974 invasive plant-free lakes or ponds and only 26 with reported infestations is an impressive record that is envied by most states -- certainly those immediately to our south and west -- as well as our Canadian provincial neighbors to the north. But with such a small percentage of lakes infested, a reasonable person can also see we have much -- perhaps the most -- to lose.

That is why prevention -- not giving invasive species the opportunity to reach our waters -- is of paramount importance.

Throughout the existence of DEP's invasive species program, some 75% of its available revenue from sales of the Maine Lake and River Protection Fund sticker has gone towards prevention efforts. That is the sticker all powered boaters must purchase when using inland waters. This has not been merely a matter of throwing milfoil sticker money at the general threat, but rather a process of seeding the tremendous, creative potential that already exists in Maine's lake communities and among lake stewards to take on the threat directly, one plant fragment at a time.

The program, the process and this potential are working. Take courtesy boat inspections as an example. Last year 350 trained and mostly volunteer courtesy boat inspectors manned boat ramps on 66 lakes and one river. There, they met boaters from 35 states—although most came from within Maine—and offered to inspect boaters' crafts, trailers and gear. They also took advantage of this teachable moment by explaining the value of inspection as an effective hands-on way to protect Maine lakes.

Courtesy boat inspectors did that 40,091 times in 2005. That's 10,000 more inspections than conducted in 2004 and 37,000 more inspections since the program's inception in 2001.

It is no accident that no new infestations were reported in 2005. Our growth in inspections shows that at boat ramps—where invasive plants have an ideal opportunity to spread in any and all directions—we in Maine are successfully outnumbering the plants!

Behind the scenes of these inspections are municipalities and lake associations who recruit and train inspectors. They must also both find funds from within their community and compete for and administer grants made available from DEP's portion of the sticker fund to support boat-ramp inspection efforts. Then there are the dedicated non-government organizations such as Lakes Environment Association and the Congress of Lake Associations that, with milfoil sticker funding, have brought inspector training sessions directly to communities that want to establish boat inspection programs.

And of course there are the volunteer-inspectors. A local Courtesy Inspector is an asset to the entire state. The inspector preventing plant fragments from leaving Balch pond in Acton is also protecting Eagle Lake in Aroostook County. And they do by taking time out from the always-too-brief summer season to stand with the bugs at a boat ramp in spring-time downpours, in mid-summer heat or to engage a sometimes, uncooperative, altruism-draining boater who, in his or her impatience to start the day on the water, could care less about milfoil.

The vigilance of other volunteers is essential as well. Since 2003, revenue from the sticker program has enabled the Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program to train 1,500 Plant Patrollers to identify both problem plants and native beneficial plants as well as how to screen lakes for presence of invasive plants.

Plant patrollers are citizen scientists able to survey boat ramps, docks inlets and coves and areas vulnerable to plant invasion. They are invaluable for engaging the state's effort to rapidly identify, contain and control any new infestation. The need for trained eyes in the field throughout Maine comes with distinction: nearly every invasive plant aquatic plant infestation detected in Maine has been detected first by alert and informed citizens.

However important prevention is to Maine's invasive species program, volunteers have also proven themselves essential in the front to control existing infestations. Last spring the DEP undertook its most ambitious hand removal effort to date on West Pond in Parsonsfield. With sticker funds going towards 223 hours of professional SCUBA divers' time and other contracted support, DEP staffers worked approximately 360 hours shoulder to shoulder—oftentimes literally—with several West Pond residents hauling out 855 cubic feet of Curly-leafed pondweed. Conditions were often frantic—and wet—since hand removal had to be done before the plants were able to release their seed pod-like turions by the end of May. And if you recall, last May was one of the wettest Mays on record.

Volunteers in Casco, working the passageway between Pleasant Lake and Parker Pond, lent their talents to other sticker-funded efforts. In what is likely to be a benchmark study in Maine of efficacy using benthic barriers that cover the Pond's floor, local residents assisted in the rollout, movement and collection of these unwieldy underwater carpets as well as provided breathtaking photo-documentation to demonstrate the effectiveness of these barriers--before and after.

I have in these few minutes been able to address only some of the roles volunteers play. There other contributions—such as milfoil hand removal efforts in many of Maine's infested lakes, construction of a prototype suction device that accelerates hand removal of plants, and the deployment of "Milfoil Area" buoys to ward boaters away from dense patches—that I wish I had more opportunity to elaborate.

My point in recognizing volunteers is to emphasize that their efforts are not merely helpful but are essential to the success of DEP's Invasive Species Program. They add the critical mass to the momentum that started the program in 2001 and allows the State to very effectively manage the dollars generated through the annual sale of the Lake and River Protection Fund stickers.

Now that we've become accustomed to writing "'06" in our checkbooks and planning for the coming season, we need to address some challenges ahead.

If invasive plant detections are anything like sports, we as a State are as good as our last season—which was pretty good.

But for individuals living with existing infestation such as Variable milfoil, there is little victory in witnessing milfoil overtaking a favorite cove or swimming area. Or perhaps a season's efforts in hand-removal rewards all that hard work with a break-even outcome: an infestation as vigorous as if it had never been disturbed.

Many folks describe their condition as desperate, with worries about the diminishing value of family recreation and real estate prices. No one can say these concerns are unjustified.

Increasingly we hear the "H" word from folks facing these problems. Usually, it is framed in a question such as, "Why doesn't the state use herbicides more regularly?" or "Why can't I use herbicide in my pond?" These are good questions that deserve good answers. We at DEP expect public interest in herbicides to increase in the coming year, so it's best that I express our position today.

Herbicides are effective tools. The DEP staff knows this first-hand as John McPhedran and his crew is currently contracting use of fluridone, a systemic herbicide in Pickerel Pond in Limerick for Hydrilla control and in an unnamed gravel pit in Scarborough for control of Eurasian milfoil.

Both these infestations are Maine's only and exist in ponds small enough to manage effectively. Further, the two species the Department is going after are also recognized by biologists as the most tenacious, most costly and most environmentally damaging plant species in North America. Containing these two pest species—preventing any opportunity for them to take hold elsewhere in Maine—is the primary benefit of using herbicide on these two ponds.

Anyone who wishes to have Maine waters treated with an herbicide must apply and be granted a waste discharge permit under State law. For the sake of brevity, this permit is a decision made on a case-by-case basis that weighs the risks of using a given herbicide against its risks. Herbicides, and all other pesticides for that matter, pose a definite degree of risk for people, for fish, and for the integrity of the aquatic ecosystem which depends on that body of water.

The biologists in the Invasive Species Program tell me that generally, the benefits of using herbicides rarely exceed the risks of very real adverse ecological impacts. As for risk, if you take the long view of pesticide use in agriculture and forestry, there are broader concerns of impacts to our environment and our health.

Containing Hydrilla and Eurasian milfoil, and preventing their spread into neighboring waters, is a benefit that exceeds the herbicide's risk of compromising the diversity of plant life in their respective ponds.

DEP biologists have seen the negative effects both published in scientific literature and in the two ponds they are treating in Maine.

Putting much larger Maine lakes on a similar regimen, treating with a routine course of herbicide treatments—perhaps indefinitely since eradication of Variable milfoil is unlikely—is not a decision easily made by an agency charged with protecting the environment. It is only in extraordinary circumstances that DEP will support use of herbicides.

Another issue facing us in the near future is the momentum shared by State and citizen collaboration alluded to earlier.

Compliance with the sticker law is outstanding. According to data collected by Courtesy Boat Inspectors, 94 per cent of all boaters—from both in and out-of-state—are buying the Lake and River Protection sticker. That's good. But what's potentially foreboding about this data is that the amount of revenue generated from this fund is likely to level off given a constant number of boaters using our inland waters. Recent figures from my colleagues at the Department of Inland Fish and Wildlife who are responsible for the collection of this revenue confirm this: sticker sales and, therefore, monies derived from the milfoil sticker this fund, while varying slightly from year to year, are generally stable.

Meanwhile, what is hardly news for most everybody here today is that costs are rising. From DEP and contractor staffing to the price gasoline and other materials, the price of today is a little more than it was yesterday. For the last 2 and a half years at DEP, one of my primary responsibilities has been to figure out ways to maintain the State's key environmental protection programs with federal environmental funding and state general revenue funds being reduced each year.

Converging with this is a concern expressed to DEP by our partners, the lake associations, Congress of Lakes Association, and Lakes Environmental Association and other non-government organizations: fewer volunteers may be stepping up to the challenge. This phenomenon is nothing extraordinary; if you've belonged to any sort of organization, you've no doubt seen that the lion's share of work is usually performed by a hard working few dedicated people.

So what is to be done when those few—the folks that have nurtured local boat inspection and/or hand-removal efforts from the very beginning—become fatigued at a time when real tangible results are being achieved?

It's been said that perseverance is not measured by any one long race in particular, but rather by many races--one after the other. Our record of no new infestation in 2005 proves we know how to win the short events by way of our collective effort.

Since invasive species are an environmental threat not ever likely to go away, we all need to focus on the next race. Your State government needs to continue to provide sticker revenues to community efforts that deliver the maximum benefits for all Maine lakes.

Until all boaters inspect their craft for threatening plants before entering and exiting Maine water, Courtesy Boat Inspections will be necessary—as will be keeping Plant Patrollers on the water. That means the continued recruitment of volunteers is a challenge that we must meet. If we do, we have shown we will succeed.

Finally, we in the public and private sectors will need to muster our creativity and resourcefulness to begin tapping new funding partners—be they federal or philanthropic.

It is a basic rule of physics that an object already in motion is easier to propel than one that is stationary. That is why I am confident we will overcome these challenges.

In this room this morning are the folks who started the State's Invasive Species program. What started as their request for state funding to contain Variable milfoil in Cushman Pond soon accelerated into the nation's only sticker program that has driven communities with plenty of their own moxie to do the remarkable: *stop invasive plant species at the water's edge*.

In closing, I will share with you one last observation. It is amazing how names like "Variable water milfoil" or "Hydrilla" are widely recognized throughout the State. It is a credit to all the lake associations and non-profits, to the DEP's outreach professionals and to Maine journalists who ably represent the public's interest by getting out the word on these troubling aquatic plants.

Since I am at the microphone for a minute or two longer, I want to share a few other names that Mainers ought to hear. Names like David Potter who, as a courtesy boat inspector on Unity Pond last June, did not settle for a boater's claim that his boat was "clean" and discovered hidden under the boat bunk a fruit of Water chestnut—an invasive plant that does not exist in Maine to this day due to David Potter's effort . Or Christina Perry, another inspector who in late July snagged a suspicious sprig on a boat just about to enter Sebago Lake. That sprig turned out to be Eurasian milfoil -- the worst type of milfoil.

Here is another: Bill Hart, a courtesy boat inspector working a shift on Rangle Lake. A Massachusetts boater, who applauded Maine's inspection efforts, assured Bill he had hosed off his boat and trailer before entering Maine. Bill found a 14-inch stem of Eurasian milfoil in the boat trailer's framework.

There are many, many other names. Like Liz Petterson who, with 50 volunteers, used their Plant Patrol training to survey more than 90 public ramps in a Hancock County-wide plant survey, all in a single week. And Dennis Spinney, a West Pond camp owner who graciously provided meals, lodging, equipment and full-time labor and assistance to the crew that removed Curly-leaf pondweed.

To all these people and the many other who go unnamed today, the DEP and the State of Maine -- on behalf of all the folks who appreciate Maine's environment -- thank you.